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# DEATH AND LA MORT

BY RICHARD FISGUILL

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So closely associated with our conceptions of right and wrong that they become moral corollaries, are our ideas of the proper and the improper. It is not easy to distinguish between the right and the proper, between the wrong and the improper. Students of civilization are apt to be reduced to the position that there is one right thing only and one wrong thing only—life and death—and that all else is merely proper or improper.

Humanity's conception of the proper and improper may become vivid to a degree. Men have not hesitated to penalize with death—the one great wrong—what at some particular time or locality they esteemed as being an improper relation. Human beings have been removed from the world for not removing their hats in the presence of one of their fellows. Yet no state has ever been able to draft sufficient laws to cover all the diversified infringement of proper relations. After the state has tired itself out with the enactment of law aimed at the differentiation of the proper and the improper, there still remains a myriad of thou-shalt-not's, unwritten, to be true, but equally as binding as written law, and to which each community of the state, every family even, may add at will.

Now if the written laws of nations be disparate and the conflict of written law be interminable, what can be said of the *unwritten* code which changes, not with climate and epochs only, with peoples and nations, with communities and families, but even with individuals themselves according to their age and sex?

With this vast domain literary expression has to deal. The law is but a continuation of the statute. Here are to be found the sources of all human expression: the difference between right and wrong being the difference between a man

and a beast. Literature is the expression of unwritten-law, as in every other pictorial form of thought—a stone hand carved in fear of the evil eye, an oil conception of beauty dedicated to love, a rhapsody contrived for delight.

Hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, loves and hatreds, ease and pain: human expression cannot get past an inevitable duality—the life side of the medal, with its converse of death. In getting that far man raised himself above the beast. Animals do not know that one day they must die.

The predominance of life, or the predominance of death, forms a natural basis of classification which sweeps through expression. Life is hopes and likes and loves and ease. Death is fears and dislikes and hatreds and pain. With the predominance of life in expression—that is, with a predominance of hopes, likes, loves, ease—you have what might be called *idealism*. With the predominance of death in expression—that is, with a predominance of fears, dislikes, hatreds, pain—you have what must be called *realism*, death being the only sure and real thing.

In *absolute idealism* the proper would overcome all obstacles and invariably obtain. Nor would there be generated in the juryman's mind any sympathy for the improper, which would be set up only to be bowled over at an opportune time, and which in so far as the juryman's mind was concerned would not suffer pain any more than inanimate matter. In absolute idealism you would eradicate the improper in some such way as you weed your lettuce. Who should pine at a weed, pulled up and withering in the sun of righteousness!

In absolute *realism*, on the other hand, death would constantly prevail. The proper would be set up only to be bowled over in the nick of time, and this proper, or good, would appear so stupid that you would feel like prodding it into evil-doing. Meanwhile the suffering of the damned would be so sympathetically set forth, so heroically portrayed, that into your adjudging mind would creep the thought that after all it were perhaps nobler to be a weed, blighted by destiny, than a succulent, stupid, righteous lettuce.

Absolute idealism and absolute realism do not exist. Expression, however, may be graded according to the percentage of idealism or realism contained. The determination of this percentage amounts to a problem.

But why should death ever be sympathetically treated—death, the great impropriety from which all other improprieties spring?

The answer is easy to find. Death constitutes a danger line for human beings. In realistic expression you play with fire and experience that peculiarly human thrill attendant upon all dangerous exercise—peculiarly human, for the beasts do not know that one day they must die.

Reason cannot be called upon to explain why the children of men should be fond of playing with fire: they are, is all we know. We like to escape; and in order successfully to escape, we must have something to escape from. We must have the fire. What fire, and how much, depends upon race and surroundings, in surroundings there being comprised both time and locality.

Fielding's dose of fire cannot be prescribed to-day for English consciousness. In the world's consciousness no nation perhaps has dared to trace so desperate a danger line as that which Burton makes plain from the Arabic. Interlacing kinds, it might be claimed that probably no picaresque expression portrays a rogue so peculiarly attractive as Mr. Hornung's infamous, sweet Raffles.

With his men on one side of the house and his women on the other—the basic condition of strictly English society—Fielding's most convenient fire was strong drink. In all things really English the standard danger line, the form of death you may most jubilantly frolic with, has until quite recently been strong drink. English consciousness has frequently worshiped a noble, magnanimous, self-sacrificing dog of a drunkard.

In Arabia, with its traditional abhorrence of strong drink, the drunkards of Fielding and Dickens, instead of arousing a thrill, would have excited nausea. And in those consciousnesses where chivalry developed an entire philosophy of chastity out of the conception of a woman-born God, the love-scented voluptuousness of Arabia had to smell like a rotten rose. Love scents, however, and camel-lipped metaphors were fire for Arabia. And the soda-fountain prevailing, but women always on the other side of the house, Mr. Hornung to arouse a thrill induces us to wonder, as we deposit our checks at the bank, if it might not be a jolly good sport, after all, to creep back at night and blow up the vault.

Drunkenness, sensuality, theft: three forms of fire, three

phases of impropriety, three degrees of death. These are phenomena of consciousness caught up at random on the surface of human expression, after they have been evolved by the currents and cross-currents of language.

Language is thought ready for shipment. Language is either words, or notes, or lines, or color. Language is the only tangible form of the human soul. Beasts cannot tell their young about death.

The language of a people is that people's soul: it is that which is left of the dead. Language is the only tangible form of the immortal past, into the molds of which, however acting or interacting, an inevitable future must be poured. With language men escape. Animals have died.

Perhaps no two of the European peoples have more signally escaped than Englishmen and Frenchmen. Yet no two of the European peoples have evolved such different methods of escape. The English soul and the French soul are barely comparable. The difference seems to be the difference between death and *la mort*.

French exhibits from the start a certain transparency which is not found in the English language. This transparency is characteristic of French, as much so as the sound of the French *u*.

Through French you see thoughts as pebbles in clear water.

From this transparency there results in French a condition which is not easy to interpret for English consciousness: it may be called *unsuggestiveness*. The pebble you perceive in French is too clearly outlined to suggest a frog.

The French language does not suggest; it pictures, or remains a blank. What it cannot picture, it does not express; what it cannot say, it does not imply. And from this there inevitably results another condition which is yet further removed from English consciousness; and that is, the *say-ableness* of French thought. French consciousness deals with sayable things—things sayable in French, but which in a consciousness like that of English may stir up such a whirlwind of suggestion as to render the thought not only unsayable but unthinkable as well. In English consciousness a judicious selection of thought must be made before proceeding to expression.

Comparing Scott and Balzac, we may consider a moment the question of thought selection, which after language itself is possibly the most important phase of consciousness.

In the light of thought selection the relation between Scott and Balzac becomes close indeed. Balzac tells us that Scott was his model. Scott's works suggested the *Comédie humaine*. What student of expression would ever have guessed that such was the case!

From beginning to end Scott's work is uniform; it is in one plane. Scott's thoughts have been judiciously selected; his mental way has been carefully surveyed: the view is inspiring. Balzac generously credits Scott with having thought more thoughts than Scott expressed. In the Frenchman's opinion Scott lacked a medium of expression; and he, Balzac, jubilantly sets forth to express all those things which Scott had thought, but which for lack of a medium Scott had been unable to record.

Balzac's generous thesis cannot be sustained. Psychology establishes an intimate dependence of ideas upon words, of thoughts upon language. A careful psychologist would be apt to alter Balzac's thesis, and say that Scott instead of lacking a medium of expression for further thoughts lacked rather the thoughts themselves, owing to the absence of a medium of expression.

Scott thought along the easy way prescribed by English consciousness and surveyed by English consciousness. Certainly Scott obeyed the laws of his consciousness, ever at work, and suppressed much. But the suppressions attributed to him by Balzac were in a very large measure suppressions of which Scott was no longer conscious—that is, intuitive suppressions, the battles about which Scott's forefathers possibly may have fought out, but which Scott himself surely had forgotten. With all his fantasy Scott never visited the heights and depths of Balzac's unsurveyed domain.

Balzac was not obliged to look for an easy way. Any and every thing was grist for his mill: no compunction, no suggestion, no awe. Balzac is possible in a consciousness which endures the French Revolution. Balzac's blood is a fluid circulating in veins and arteries, a red fluid, nothing more. In English blood suggests gore: the pebble may be a frog.

Scott possibly would have experienced the same difficulty in shaping *La Cousine Bette* as English commoners might have experienced in directing the French Revolution, or as Ruskin did experience in rating *Mona Lisa*—the difficulty, namely, arising from English awe.

Balzac saw more forms of life than Scott; he saw, too, more forms of impropriety—of death. Instead of disposing of death forms, as did Shakespeare, with a rumble of righteous thunder, Balzac lays death forms nakedly down and holds an autopsy. Balzac is quite as proud of having discovered an ulcer in the vitals of virtue as he is of having found a virtue in the entrails of vice. Both weeds and lettuce are plants for Balzac: life and death are equally legitimate. Continually he finds death in life and life in death. He accepts death as an imposed condition. Balzac does not stand in awe.

The word *awe* has been chosen to express the antithesis of unsuggestiveness. The same difficulty would be experienced in carrying over into French consciousness the meaning of English awe as is encountered in bringing over into English consciousness the condition of unsuggestiveness.

Much, if not the greater part, of Shakespeare is awe. Translated into naked French and thus deprived of awe, Shakespeare loses and bears off toward the unenviable position of an author of blood and thunder episodes, such as Paul Bourget uses to undermine the character of his *Disciple*. From the point of view of French consciousness little difficulty is experienced in appreciating Bourget's attitude toward Shakespeare, and none whatever that of Voltaire, who has been held accountable for the French depreciation of the foremost English author. Voltaire could not have been himself and endured Shakespeare.

Shakespeare and Voltaire may be compared. It is not harder to compare Shakespeare and Voltaire than it is to compare English consciousness and French consciousness, though it is quite as hard.

Awful Shakespeare, gloomy even in his mirth, means for English expression what naked Voltaire, gay even in his gloom, means for French expression. One may signify a yard, the other a bushel; but they represent the standards of measurement for their respective national expressions.

Shakespeare edges away from life off toward death. Voltaire edges away from death off toward life. Shakespeare, accepting life as a questionable blessing, is fascinated by the awfulness of death, which even in his happiest moments he cannot help dreading. Voltaire, accepting death as an unquestioned curse, is fascinated by the beauties of life, which he covets down to the end.

These statements are not to be taken in the popularly religious sense. Shakespeare was not a churchman; Voltaire was not an atheist. Hid somewhere in consciousness there is an influence which is more powerfully determining than religion. This influence, in determining our attitude toward death, inevitably ends by determining our religion. A national religion is but one phase of the national consciousness, and is as dependent upon that consciousness as a rule of syntax.

Shakespeare's attitude toward life and death is the attitude of English consciousness, whatever be the name of the religion involved.

Voltaire's attitude toward life and death is the attitude of French consciousness—the same attitude which in one form or another has made itself felt in French religious matters from the times of Avignon down to the present day. French consciousness may be Catholic, Protestant, or atheist; but it is ever Voltairian.

French consciousness and death are old acquaintances. French consciousness starts out with death recognized, and humanly attempts to make the best of a bad condition. French consciousness is Jewish rather than Christian, the Old Testament rather than the New. And Voltaire's influence upon his national expression has been so preponderant that Voltaire's influence upon France can be compared only to that of Jesus upon the world.

Up to Voltaire's appearance French consciousness seems slowly to have been forming a Voltaire. Since his appearance willingly or unwillingly French consciousness has always harked back to him, and especially in this sense: that human force consists not so much of a specific attribute as of a general sum of attributes.

Voltaire represents the antithesis of individualism. In any one of his individualistic phases he is inferior; but the sum of his individualistic phases is equal to a group of men. Voltaire is the chairman of his faculties, not the dictator. No one of his faculties reigns supreme after subjugating the others.

Voltaire is a republic in himself—a thing which both Buonaparte and Hugo tried hard to be, but which military specific on the one hand and lyric specific on the other kept them from attaining. Republicanism is realism. A republic is the political form of realism—a condition of equal



rights, whatever the leveling results may be. A specific naturally cannot endure such a state. From his very nature a specific must be as hostile to realism as realism is hostile to a specific. A specific can but be monarchical in his trend. Louis XIV., Buonaparte, Hugo—possibly the three most marked French specifics—are quite as un-French, though in a different sense, as Hardy and Shaw are un-English.

The low notes of thunder, so dear to the souls of specifics, are distasteful to French consciousness. Shakespeare made Voltaire grin: Shakespeare rumbled, Shakespeare ranted, Shakespeare was vague.

Voltaire preached simplicity: nothing could be sublime that was not simple; nothing existed that was not clear; nothing might be charming that was not naïf. Toward the end of his life Voltaire decided that the Old Testament was the book best worth reading, because the Old Testament was the most naïf of books.

Voltaire's continual harping on naïveté is the final expression of what French consciousness had from the beginning tried to say, and which French consciousness is ever trying to attain.

Naïveté in consciousness is the direct product of unsuggestiveness, just as unsuggestiveness is the direct product of linguistic transparency. From linguistic transparency, which prevents all doubt as to what the pebble really is, we arrive at the unsuggestive conception of a pebble, and thereafter face the consequences of naïveté, by asserting that 'tis a pebble, not a frog.

As judged by French consciousness, Lafontaine's naïveté raises him to the rank of a poetic genius. In the light of English consciousness Lafontaine falls to the level of a mere rhymers. Rousseau's naïveté is what Jules Lemaître, imbued with monarchical views of government, calls insanity. And naïveté is a highly dangerous form of intelligence for one-man power. Naïveté grins at pomp. Naïveté is Rousseau's little white house with green blinds, his orchard and cows, his lunch on the grass where each guest should wait on himself or go hungry. Naïveté is insouciance. Naïveté is naked unsuggestiveness, such as all men enjoyed before they knew of sin—terrestrial paradise, in fine, not the heavenly abode. And Adam's terrestrial paradise was a republic of equal unities, the abode of realism.

Naïveté is a pagan virtue which was carried over into

Christianity: "Suffer little children to come unto me." And pagan naïveté is that principle of Christianity which has taken the strongest hold upon French consciousness.

Anatole France might well have been an Athenian. And Anatole France, like Voltaire, is a man whom French consciousness only could have produced in modern times. From *Silvestre Bonnard* to *Les dieux ont soif* Anatole France, like Voltaire, is forever forging a disconcerting naïveté. Paul Verlaine is a member of the same family. Naked, shivering, aware of nothing more mysterious than a seagull's quivering wing, Paul Verlaine wallows there on the edge of death, his *grand sommeil noir*, and grips your hand, your heart, as only a pagan could. What are Tennyson's afternoon idle tears compared to the choked blubberings of poor old bald-headed, bald-brained, bald-hearted Paul Verlaine? Well-nigh absolute idealism, compared to well-nigh absolute realism; winnowed sentimentality, as opposed to raw naïveté.

The naïveté of French consciousness is paganly raw.

Cervantes frequently has been called naïf. But the naïveté of Cervantes is that of a reasoning old man and a mystic, not the naïveté of youth's rank fears and death-haunted paganism. Paganism fits humanity's youth. In transforming objective incongruity into harmony for his own subjectiveness, Don Quixote trod Santa Teresa's road, the way of mysticism, where thorn wreaths turn to garlands, and the peasant-girl Aldonza to high-born Dulcinea. Tartarin de Tarascon is humanly, youthfully, paganly naïf. Don Quixote is a Christian scholar, tediously returning to simple things after much reading and deep meditation.

This spirit of renouncement, of going back to primitive things after having experienced the hollowness of showiness—of going back to primitive things and decking these same primitive things out in all the showiness of those things you have found to be hollow, mysticism in a word, an Oriental accident of Christianity—can be called Spain's quota to Occidental consciousness, and is perhaps the bond of union which unites such disparate elements as Lope de Vega, Calderón, Espronceda, Pereda, Galdós.

But the French spirit has never renounced, for the very excellent reason of its never having quit youthful naïveté for more pretentious fields. Even the influence of Provence, which might well have made of France another Italy, went

down before the Voltairian grin. In French expression Voltaire's grin crops out all the way from *Aucassin et Nicolète* to *La tentation de Saint Antoine*. This is not Dante's naïveté.

Dante never grinned: he was young enough, child enough, but he could not. Dante was a learned child who took his playthings to heaven—and with him he seems to have carried also his nation's consciousness. D'Annunzio tries to spiritualize his profane toys after the manner of Dante and Petrarch; Leopardi spiritualizes pessimism, De Amicis an urchin. All this appears more innocent and youthful than the tired Spanish consciousness, which instead of taking its playthings to heaven brings heaven down to its playthings. And both the Spanish and the Italian attitude seem more youthful and innocent than that of English consciousness, which in the person of Milton goes off to heaven by itself, clad in a good English soul only and shrouded with Shakespearean awe. But all three of these conditions come to be sophisticated when compared to that of French consciousness, which from Christianity assimilates not mysticism, nor spirituality, nor awe, but the incorporated pagan virtue of death-recognized naïveté.

The consciousness of a people takes from religion, from Christianity, or from any other form of philosophy, that which best it can assimilate. The religion of a people is the attitude of that people toward death.

The dead in French consciousness are very dead. "*Les morts sont bien morts.*" Marcelle Tynaire makes this the motif of her strongest work. But throughout French expression from *La vie de Saint Alexis* to Maupassant's *Bel Ami* the dead are hopelessly and irretrievably dead. What better things in spite of all his pretty words did Châteaubriand see in death than Verlaine's *grand sommeil noir*? Hugo's dead live only when he stirs up the ashes of a hearth or of a heart. Alfred de Vigny asks us to die without prayer and without complaint. Lamartine, like Zola, is tired even of hope. And when Zola's tremendous but misunderstood heart drops dying children into the great black sleep of death they are unspeakably gone.

The French recognition of death and the hopelessness attendant thereupon shapes the French distinction between head and heart—a distinction so foreign to English consciousness as at times to necessitate the translation of *head*

in French by *heart* in English, and vice versa. Balzac warns us that in things not arithmetical we must look to our hearts, not to our heads, for satisfaction. This is Voltaire's old message differently expressed—the Garden of Eden, not heaven. The head carves out immortality; the heart clings to earth. Heads have reasoned about immortality; hearts still bleed for the rotting dead. Here it is that French naïveté takes a turn which is logical enough for French consciousness, but bewildering indeed if not examined with French lenses: the fleshiness of the French heart is meant.

In French consciousness the heart is flesh, the head and soul a conception. The sister-soul form of love and the brother-soul form of friendship do not in French consciousness belong to the domain of the heart, as in English, but to the domain of the head—the head, which first creates for its own self a soul and thereafter injects another soul into the other head-loved head. Heads loving heads and souls loving souls are synonomous expressions. Neither heads nor souls form a part of the body, the body being the abode of the heart. The heart is flesh, the head and soul a conception. This attitude is impossible in English consciousness, where just as blood suggests gore, flesh suggests Satan. And flesh is a synonym of Satan. Flesh is the antithesis of the soul; flesh is the antithesis of immortality; flesh is the synonym of death. But death is synonymous with Satan—the prince of darkness, the great adversary which the pagans accepted from the start as being one against whom they might not prevail. Flesh rots; rots too the heart which reigns over flesh; and from this rotting realm French consciousness has wrested Eden by means of naïveté, nativity, naturalness, nature.

The possibilities of naïveté are as inexhaustible as the possibilities of nature. Naïveté is nature projected into human consciousness. And nature is the rock and beast realm which science has wrested from religion.

Science is as pagan as naïveté. Science is pagan naïveté ticketed and classified, and ultimately ending, as do all pagan conceptions, in unavoidable death. The sun must die, the earth must die, life must become extinct; and science stops with man. Science is absolute realism applied to learned expression. In science a flower is the organ of a plant. There is no idealism: the heart is flesh. Science does not attempt to restore heaven, but to develop the earth.

Science's dream is Eden. Science is sure of but one single thing, and that is individualistic death.

Naïveté, then, turns out to be the literary exponent of science, the only refuge Voltaire could see for his people on the horizon of time, governed as they had to be by a transparent consciousness in which a pebble lay too clearly outlined to suggest a frog.

The terms of literary criticism are indiscriminately absorbed by expression. Literary criticism is unavailable for expression. Expression oscillates between life and death—from realism to idealism, and back again. Literature is the by-product, and the by-product merely, of an attempt at expression. Literary criticism is the by-product of a by-product. Literary criticism is removed, it is a distraction, it is optional. Expression is tied up with the life principle of consciousness. There may and frequently does exist a realistic expression of idealism, just as there may and frequently does exist an idealistic expression of realism.

Much of what Shakespeare portrays is realism, but Shakespeare's expression is idealistic. Shakespeare's expression is not artless, native, natural, naïf. Shakespeare's expression sweeps past men and leaves the world of men, as does Byron's, Milton's, Kipling's. Kipling's realism is quite as idealistically expressed as that of Shakespeare. And if we pause to note the preponderance in the popular mind of Kipling over Stevenson, we may easily discern that English consciousness yet insists as it always has done upon an idealistic, unnatural expression, whatever be the subject portrayed. English consciousness prefers Kipling's idealistic expression of the real to Stevenson's realistic expression of the ideal.

Stevenson's position in English consciousness inversely corresponds to that of Rostand's in French consciousness, and both positions are unfortunate. Stevenson attempts the realistic expression of idealism for English consciousness, Rostand attempts the idealistic expression of reality for French consciousness; and both men have to leave their native countries for full appreciation.

French consciousness yet insists, as it always has done, upon realistic, natural, naïf expression, whatever be the subject portrayed. And to-day French consciousness prefers Alfred de Musset's realistic expression of idealism to Rostand's idealistic expression of reality.

If Stevenson and Rostand might have swapped countries their respective literatures perhaps would have been richer. Nor can students of expression doubt for a moment that Thackeray would have been greater as a Frenchman than as an Englishman. Oscar Wilde had to think in French. And Oscar Wilde is pagan Verlaine's pagan brother: they both wallowed on the edge of the *grand sommeil noir*, and they squirmed as the tide came up.

It has been advanced that the consciousness of a people is attracted to realism by the inherent tendency of human beings to play with fire—realism being synonymous with death, or some lesser form of impropriety. Further, it has been hinted that certain peoples in their consciousness exhibit tendencies to frolic with certain forms of impropriety. Drunkenness and theft were boldly ascribed to English consciousness as being the English preference, provided—eternally provided—that these forms of impropriety be set down in idealistic expression. Raffles has to be a gentleman and an excellent judge of tobacco.

Also an attempt has been made to show that French consciousness manifests not only the inherent tendency to dance with danger such as is common to human expression, but that French consciousness has a special tendency peculiar to itself, based upon the unsuggestive transparency of its linguistic medium and the resulting attitude toward death. Whatever be the French subject portrayed, French expression must be realistic or cease strictly to be French expression.

There remains one question to ask. What form of death, or impropriety, or reality, has French consciousness preferred—this Gallic consciousness, which expresses even idealism realistically?

The answer permits of no hesitation. French consciousness has, does, and evidently always will prefer the improprieties of the heart to other forms of death—the improprieties of the human, fleshy, rotting heart; the heart of a man with its fangs sunk into the heart of a woman, the heart of a woman with its fangs sunk into the heart of a man.

Steal, if you must; but steal a heart. Drink, if you would be drunk; but drink of love. All that is the Gallic heart-fang form of death. And *la mort* is graciously feminine.

RICHARD FISGUILL.